AUDIO PLAYERS

Get Your Windows XP PC Ready

We've seen you standing there in the electronics store, eyeing those portable audio players: the iPod, the Dell Digital Jukebox, the Creative Nomad Jukebox Zen, among others. They tempt you with the allure of funky beats and engrossing spoken word audio in the car, on the subway, while working out, wherever.

That's OK; yield to temptation. But before you do, you'll want to be sure your computer is ready to work with the portable audio gadget of your choice. Read on and you can be sure that your PC is as ready to use that new portable player as you are.

iPod

($199 to $399; www.apple.com/ipod)

All versions of the iPod, including the iPod mini and iPod Photo, work with WinXP. It doesn't require any service packs (including WinXP SP2) to be installed. iPods also work with Windows 2000 with Service Pack 4 but not Windows 98. The iPod and iTunes (the song-managing software that your PC uses with your iPod) don't require much on the hardware side: You'll need either a FireWire or a USB (Universal Serial Bus) 2.0 port, a 500MHz or faster processor, and 128MB RAM (though 256MB is recommended).

Chances are your PC already has a FireWire or USB 2.0 port. To find out, navigate to the Windows Control Panel, click Performance And Maintenance (in Category View), and then select System. Click the Hardware tab and select Device Manager. If you see IEEE 1394 Bus Host Controller, then the PC has FireWire.

But be careful; there's also an older version of USB, version 1.1, that isn't compatible with iPods. In the Device Manager window, look for an item labeled Universal Serial Bus Controllers. If it's there, click the plus icon. If you see an item with the word Enhanced (such as Enhanced PCI [Periphal Component Interconnect] To USB Host Controller), the PC has USB 2.0 ports.

Have both ports? It doesn't really matter which one you use; the iPod includes cables for both. However, some

PCs may have a 4-pin FireWire port rather than the usual 6-pin port. In this case, you'll need a 4-to-6-pin FireWire adapter, or you can just use the USB 2.0 port. The iPod, which normally charges when connected to the PC, will not do so when connected to a 4-pin FireWire port.

If your computer has neither FireWire nor USB 2.0, you can add one with a PCI add-on card such as the Belkin 3-Port FireWire Expansion PCI Card ($34.99; www.belkin.com) or the Keyspan U2PCI-5 USB 2.0 Card ($39; www.keyspan.com). Your local computer store will probably have several choices for these or other cards, which typically cost $20 to $40.

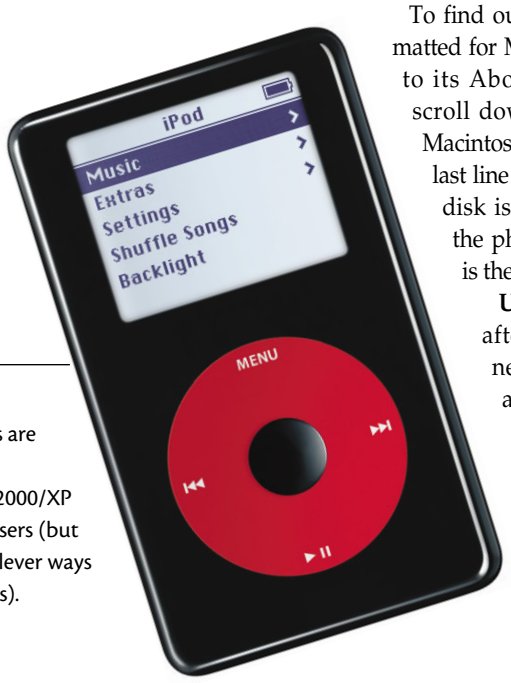
Your new iPod will include a CD-ROM with the iPod driver and iTunes software: Install them both on your PC. It is possible that there's a newer version of iTunes since your unit was packaged. Point your Web browser to www.apple.com/itunes to download and install the latest version.

If you'd prefer not to install iTunes at all, RealPlayer 10.5 (www.real.com) is also compatible with the iPod. However, most users will probably be happier using Apple's official software, or at least having access to it in addition to RealPlayer.

Mac or PC format. You can connect any iPod to either a Mac or Windows PC, but you can't switch easily between the two systems. If you acquire an iPod (perhaps a used model) that was previously used with a Mac, you can make it compatible with Windows by using the PC's iPod Restore function. This reformats the iPod's hard drive, so you'll lose all music and other information stored on it. To reformat, click the Start menu and choose All Programs, iPod, and Updater. Click Restore. More details about the process are at docs.info.apple.com/article.html?artnum=60983.

To find out whether an iPod is formatted for Mac or Windows, navigate to its About (or Info) screen and scroll down. If it is formatted for Macintosh, the serial number is the last line of the About screen. If the disk is formatted for Windows, the phrase "Format: Windows" is the last line.

Update the firmware. Soon after you get the iPod connected to the PC, charged, and working, find out if it has the latest firmware. First, access the iPod's About screen to find out which firmware version it is currently running. Next, visit www.apple.com/ipod/download to see the latest firmware version for your model. If there's a new version, download and install it.

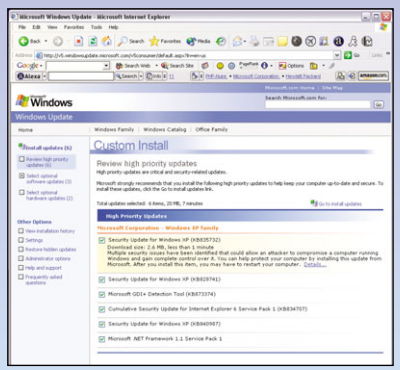


The iPod's good looks are limited to Windows 2000/XP and Mac users (but there are clever ways around this).

Setup Considerations For Every Player

The software that comes with most portable music players, in addition to copying songs to the player, lets you listen to tunes on your PC, too. So while it's not absolutely necessary, you may want to hook a good set of speakers to your PC.

This is also an ideal time to make sure your Windows installation has the latest service packs, as well as sound card, USB, and FireWire drivers. With the latest hardware drivers installed, playing music and transferring files will go more smoothly. The Microsoft Windows Update Web site (windowsupdate.microsoft.com) makes it easy to check for and install these updates.



Windows Update will automatically fetch the latest drivers for your sound card and other peripherals.

The software for your portable player also benefits from an Internet connection—again, not strictly required but helpful. The programs may download information from CD databases, play streaming radio stations, and let you buy more music from online music stores.

Also, remember that a 128Kbps MP3 file takes up about 1MB of hard drive space for each minute of audio, so if you'll be ripping your entire CD collection for transfer to your portable player, you'll need plenty of free hard drive space. Look into investing in a larger or second one.

Dell Digital Jukebox

($199 to $389; www.dell.com)

The Dell Digital Jukebox (also called the DJ) is another popular portable player. Two versions are currently available: the Pocket DJ, with 5GB of storage and the DJ 20, with 20GB.

The Digital Jukebox requires a USB 2.0 connection to your PC. (If your PC doesn't have USB 2.0, you'll need to install an add-on card before using the DJ.) The player includes MusicMatch Jukebox software for transferring music from your PC to the DJ. MusicMatch requires a 300MHz or faster processor but recommends 1GHz or faster.

The Dell DJ works with more operating systems than the iPod: Windows 98SE/Me/2000 (with Service Pack 3 or later)/XP.

Setup is straightforward: First, plug the DJ into the AC power outlet to charge its battery. (In the future, when

the battery is more than a quarter charged, you can charge it using the PC's USB connection.) Install the bundled software on your PC. Once the DJ is charged, connect it to the PC using the included USB cable. Run MusicMatch, and you are ready to transfer music to the device.

As with the iPod or any other new digital device, it's a good idea to install new software and firmware if they are available. Find out what firmware version your DJ has by navigating to its Information screen. To look for new Jukebox firmware, point your Web browser to search.dell.com. In the Enter Search Keyword(s) Or Part Number field, type **jukebox firmware**. In the Search Within drop-down menu, select Technical Support and then click Go. On the search results page, click Sort By Date: The latest firmware, software updates, and news about the DJ will appear at the top of the list. Follow the site's instructions to install any new software or firmware.

Creative Nomad Jukebox Zen

($219 to $299; www.creative.com)

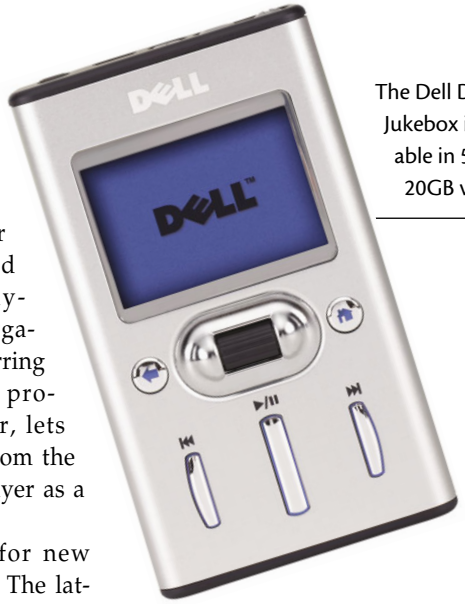
The Creative Nomad Jukebox Zen is yet another well-liked player for taking music on the go, providing a 20GB or 60GB hard drive–the latter is enough to store 1,000 hours of MP3s.

When it comes to connecting to a PC, the Nomad, available in two versions, is rather flexible. The USB 2.0 version requires a USB 2.0 connection, while the FireWire/1.1 version can connect either to a FireWire port or an older USB 1.1 port. USB 1.1, however, should be your last option. It is considerably slower than USB 2.0 and FireWire and will leave you waiting a very long time to transfer a large amount of music. Both versions work with Win98SE/Me/2000/XP running on a 233MHz or faster processor.

Setting up the Nomad for the first time is similar to the other players. First, charge up the battery via the A/C adapter, USB, or FireWire connection. (If you're in a hurry to start playing with your new toy, use A/C power to charge; Creative says it takes the least amount of time.)

Connect the Nomad to the PC, turn it on, and install the software from the CD-ROM to your PC. Two of the most notable software programs available with your Nomad are PlayCenter and Creative File Manager. PlayCenter is the software for organizing your music and transferring it to the Nomad. The other program, Creative File Manager, lets you move data files to and from the Nomad, as well as use the player as a portable storage device.

Next, it's time to check for new firmware and driver updates. The latest Jukebox firmware is available for download from www.nomadworld.com/downloads/firmware. Access the latest drivers at www.nomadworld.com/downloads/drivers.



The Dell Digital Jukebox is available in 5GB and 20GB versions.

Other Portable Audio Players

There are countless other brands and models of portable audio players. The one that's calling your name in the computer store could be from Rio, RCA, Sony, or a dozen other companies. No matter which portable player you choose, the setup procedure for WinXP is basically the same: Make sure your hardware and operating system are compatible with the player, install the software that's included with the player, check the Web for updates, and upgrade the player's firmware if necessary. Naturally, you should always read the users manual to find out about the specific setup requirements for that particular model.

Before you know it, your new portable player will be connected to your PC, filling up with hours of music to keep you groovin'. PCT

by Kevin Savetz

Special Considerations For Windows 98

Sorry, Win98 users: The iPod does not officially support Win98. But if you insist, there's a way around that limitation. A few third-party utilities can transfer music to the iPod, including Ephpod (free; www.ephpod.com), Anapod Explorer (free limited trial; $25; www.redchairsoftware.com/anapod), and RealPlayer (free; www.real.com). For FireWire access, one of those programs is all you need. For USB (Universal Serial Bus) 2.0 access, you'll also need to download and install the iPod USB Driver For Windows 98 (free; www.republika.pl/mho/ipod).

Unlike the iPod, the Dell Digital Jukebox and its bundled MusicMatch software do work with Windows 98 Second Edition. If you're still using the first edition of Win98, Dell recommends installing the DJ driver and Explorer software (the program for moving data files to and from the device) but not MusicMatch. Instead, use Windows Media Player 9 Series to transfer music to the DJ. An alternative is Dudebox Explorer (free limited trial; $25; www.redchairsoftware.com/dudebox), a third-party program for moving and organizing music on the DJ.

The Nomad Jukebox Zen works with Win98. You'll need Win98SE to transfer music over FireWire, but the first edition is good enough for transferring music with USB. ▮